

PLUS CA CHANGE

Shadowrun *n.* Any movement, action, or series of such made in carrying out plans which are illegal or quasilegal.
—WorldWide WordWatch, 2050 update

Some things change, some don't. Take the sprawl, for one. On the outside, Seattle may look like it's always changin'. But don't be fooled, chummer. Underneath all the glitz and the grit, everything's the same.

It's like a livin' thing, the sprawl. A hungry one. No matter how much food and fuel comes in by port or by highway, or how much data pours in through the Matrix, Seattle just swallows it all, then opens its gaping maw and screams for more.

People get swallowed up, too. Maybe not the ones who arrive by plane or by zep, those folks with nuyen to burn and connections to keep 'em safe. No, it's the others I'm talkin' about. Street meat's always a hot product in a town with so many hunters. Like in King Street Station, where the old city and the new blood mix.

Under the shadow of the Renraku Arcology, train and bus lines bring the newbies into the sprawl. They come followin' their dreams, or maybe runnin' from their nightmares, to find the life they've heard about in the city by the Sound. There's the back-country kids from the Native American lands, runaways from UCAS or California Free State, even elvenkind, rebellin' against the fantasy-chip life in Tir Tairngire. They all think Seattle's a place where magic lives on every corner and people dance in the shadows.

A lotta them find out that other things live in shadows.

That day I was watchin' the crowds at King Street for one particular face. A pretty face, framed in blonde hair, maybe nineteen years old, with a stubborn set to the jaw that I kinda liked. I had a holo in my pocket 'puter that put a name to it: Sheila Winder, late of a corporate enclave in San Francisco, daughter of a mid-to-upper-level exec couple. Seems she'd told mom and dad where to shove their corp lifestyle and then jandered out of suit city. When the corp heat questioned her chummers, they said she'd bugged out for Seattle. That's how one of Mitsuhamas

Mr. Johnsons happened to send out a call along the vine for some runners who knew the Seattle shadows.

I spotted her easy enough. The imaging circuitry in my right eye confirmed the ID. Problem was, someone else picked up on her at the same time. I figured he was a gander, out pickin' up fresh geese. Maybe a pimp who wanted to expand his stable, maybe a recruiter for somethin' nastier. Some places have a high turnover rate, but the only unemployment their workers collect are death benefits. This gander was a scrawny guy in a long overcoat, movin' through the crowd, watchin' the faces, lookin' for product that would sell.

He was closer to the girl'n I was. I could have gotten to her first, if I'd cut in the wires that boost my reflexes. But movin' through a downtown crowd at 70 kph isn't the smart thing to do when you want to avoid undue attention from Lone Star. So I was still a few dozen meters away when the gander walked right up to Sheila.

The usual drill when a gander moves in on a new goose is some fast talk and maybe a friendly hand on the suitcase, just helpin' out, y'understand. This guy's approach was different. He held up one skinny finger in front of the girl's face and traced some kinda tricky pattern. Her big blue eyes went blank and she froze. I froze for a second, too, hopin' this wasn't what it looked like. The girl just stood there while he picked up her carry-on bag. I had a bad feelin' about that tricky finger. Fraggit! I hate goin' up against a wizard.

His back was to me, which was about the only thing that suited me about this ooizin' drekheap of a situation. I revved my nervewires; not much, just enough to let me cover the space between us before the magician could turn around. Grabbing his neck in one hand and the girl's bag in the other, I swung him around in a restricted *kokyunage* throw. You do it right, and nobody knows you had anythin' to do with the fact that the other guy hits the ground. Hard.

The fall winded him. I'd counted on that. The girl blinked, and started to take an interest in things again. I'd hoped for that. The gander-wiz had lost his concentration and the spell he put on her broke down. I put on my "company" voice, the one I use for Lone Star cops and corporate Johnsons. "Miss, this place is dangerous. If you'll come along with me, I'd be happy to escort you to a safer area." Well drek, she just looked at me goo-goo-eyed and then at the little slotter lyin' on the ground in front of us.

The gander's overcoat was stiff here and there, where the armor showed. I was wearin' one like it myself, only cleaner. Under the coat, he had on a T-shirt made outta some kind of short gray fur. Decorations—fetishes, the wizards call 'em—hung down the front. The prettier ones looked like road-kill with feathers. From his fashion sense, I figured I'd come up against some kind of shaman, probably a Rat man. His eyes were losin' that glazed expression and comin' into focus on me. Not somethin' I was thrilled about. A wizard can put a spell on anythin' he can see, and gander-boy could see me real good.

I thought about bein' subtle. Then the wiz pulled one of the fetishes off his shirt and pointed it at me. I decided it wasn't a good time for subtle. I stepped in and booted him in the groin. Whatever spell he had in mind didn't seem to happen, so I guess I broke his concentration again.

The direct approach seemed to be workin' good, so I grabbed Sheila Winder by the wrist. "Fraggit," I growled. "C'mon!" She was either still woozy from the spell or she had an attack of good sense,

'cause she came along nice and quiet as I headed for an exit. That was good. Carryin' her probably would've caused talk.

All this took maybe 15 seconds. Meanwhile, back at the shaman, people were startin' to notice that some guy was having an acute attack of somethin' or other. I let my tongue brush a contact in my lower left molar. I'd autoprogrammed the phone to dial the right number as soon as it was turned on. The mastoid-implant receiver made it sound like Neddy was right next to me when he answered.

I've got a pickup buried in my Adam's apple, so I muttered to Neddy while I wormed my way through the crowd with Sheila in tow. "I got the girl at King Street, but there's maybe a problem."

"What sort of difficulty are you experiencing, my nameless friend?" Neddy always talks like he's auditioning to be the next Mr. Dictionary on *WordWatch*.

"She got picked out by a gander, street shaman, and he tried to zap her."

"Zap? Really, now, that's no help. What kind of spell did he use?"

"Oozin' drek, Neddy! How the frag do I know? You better get the others over here. I'm headin' out onto Jackson...." I got interrupted as we were leaving the station and turning onto Jackson Street.

Gander-wiz had back-up along, looked like. The one on the left made his approach noisy. I was supposed to turn to meet him, which'd leave his buddy free to take me out from behind. Pivoting to meet the attack from the left, I slung the girl out of the line of engagement. That's when my Ares Wiremaster Audio Enhancers picked up the gentle scrape of shoe plastic on the pavement. I was halfway into a mule kick to meet the one coming in from the rear, but the attack came so fraggin' fast, I was lucky my spine didn't snap.

Riding the impact of the blow, I rolled clear of the attack to get a look at the one who'd tried to draw my attention. It was an ork, whose hands showed nerve contact pads, the kind they use for cheap smartgun links that don't form a dermal circuit. His movement had a slo-mo quality that told me his nerve wires, if he had any, were slower than mine. His partner—the fast one—was a human woman. She wasn't showing any obvious cyberware, but she matched my moves with a flowin' speed that screamed warnings at me. Either she had top-of-the-line body mods, or she was an adept, someone who uses magic to pull the kind of stunts the rest of us need cyberware to match.

We shuffled around tryin' for position. Even without gunplay, a trio of samurai playing ring around the rosie in this part of town was going to draw in Lone Star, maybe Renraku security as well, so we all wanted to get this over fast. Fightin' under that kind of time limit is a good way to hose up, and the ork made the first mistake. He fainted a long kick, then charged in as I retreated. Only my retreat was faked, too, and I met him with a fist-knee-elbow combination that dropped him, pukin', on the sidewalk.

I didn't have time for a follow-up on the ork because his partner was coming in. I backpedaled away from a flurry of hand-technique strikes, blocking like crazy. I threw a counterkick and the adept back-flipped out of striking range. That bothered me. My move wasn't enough of a threat for that kind of avoidance. When Sheila yelled out a warning, I whirled around and decided I'd rather have dealt with the adept. The Rat shaman was standing about ten meters away, a fetish in his hand and a nasty look on his face. I yanked out my Browning MaxPower, but there was no way I could get off a shot before he cast his spell.

He shrieked out a couple of words and, honest to Ghost, his eyes flashed red under the streetlights as a bolt of somethin' dazolin' went off right in my face. My corneal flare compensators kicked out in the overload, and I was blind. Figgering I was about to settle an old bet with Neddy about life after death, I was pretty surprised to discover the gun bucking in my hand as I pumped half the clip in the direction I'd been facing. Then I waited for my body to report pain, burns, somethin'.

My vision cleared up instead, showing me what was left of the shaman scattered all over the sidewalk. Behind me came a voice whose drawl was familiar. "Loading explosives again, I see. Someday, Nameless, you really must try a subtler approach."

I heard sirens on the streets, gettin' closer. Neddy could hear 'em too, but he's just gotta print out the wisecracks. "I tried subtle, Neddy. It didn't work too good, s'right? Now can we get outta here and over t'yer squat?"

Wizards. Sheesh.

Sheila Winder was staring bemusedly at my business card. It identified one Nathaniel Edward Fortescue, Doctor of Thaumaturgy. Perhaps she found this touch of urbanity rather at odds with the surroundings. My residence, which Nameless regrettably calls a "squat," is on the fringes of the Redmond Barrens. In my experience, the neighbors in a Downtown Militarized Zone like this one

may shoot first and ask questions later if disturbed, but will generally respect one's privacy if left to their own pursuits. Admittedly, a regular stipend to the local gang leaders helps to preserve the quiet life. So does a reputation for dealing summarily with those who attempt to disturb it.

For someone raised in the sterile environment of an executive-class corporate enclave, Ms. Winder had received a fairly intensive introduction to life in the sprawl. During her first five minutes in Seattle, she had been placed under mind control by a Rat shaman, observed a duel among three street samurai at close quarters, and topped the experience off by seeing Nameless blow the shaman into hamburger.

Her aplomb was still being tested. Sitting in my parlor, she found herself under the scrutiny of a typically mixed team of shadow folk. She had adjusted well enough to Nameless and me, both relatively normal-looking examples of humanity. However, the other two members of the group hardly fit the corporate standard. The only metahumans she had seen in her home environment were a few showcase elves and dwarfs, and the occasional token ork who had undergone enough cosmetic surgery to preserve the delicate sensibilities of the neighbors. It seemed an open question whether she was more fascinated by Iris or Smedley.

Iris is an elf, and I will freely admit that she is one of most strikingly beautiful women I have ever met, of any race. Popular culture projects an image of elvenkind as poetic, romantic figures,



and among children of Ms. Winder's generation, there is an element of outright idolatry vis-à-vis the elves. The fact that Iris was dressed in baggy, grease-stained coveralls and wore her silver hair shaved at one temple to accommodate a set of rigger jacks seemed to offend the Winder girl's notions of elven ladies.

Smedley, on the other hand, is a troll. One might say he is a troll-and-a-half, since he stands a hair under three meters tall and tips the scale at 240 kilograms. His skin is a mass of toughened hide, scars, and the nodules, commonly miscalled warts, common to his race.

Despite a steady diet of culture shock, Ms. Winder proved a resilient young lady, and recovered well from the excitement earlier in the evening. As a matter of fact, she was in better shape than Nameless. Though I had been able to shield him from the brunt of the shaman's last spell, he had suffered several minor wounds in his duel with the female samurai. Once we were in the van and safely en route across Lake Washington, I extended my perceptions into astral space and examined the wounds before healing them. The traces were faint, but evident to the trained observer. His opponent's hands had been charged with lethal energy, either the result of a spell or the inherent power of a physical adept. Either way, the woman Nameless had fought was formidable...too formidable for the time and place.

"...and that poses an intriguing conundrum. When we factor in the presence of a shaman and a physical adept, as well as a samurai who would have been quite deadly against a less-skilled opponent than Nameless, it does not add up. The return-on-investment from a gander operation, randomly picking up waifs and strays, is simply too low for people of this caliber.

"So we must ask why such high-priced talent singled you out in a crowd, and pursued you in the face of determined opposition? To the death, in fact. Who wants you that much, Sheila Winder?"

Her face was impassive. "My parents..?"

"I must inform you that we were contracted by your parents, or their agent, to collect you and ship you back to San Francisco."

She made a sound halfway between a gasp and a whimper. It had not occurred to her that our interest in her plight was not altruistic. "Look, Mr., uh, Fortescue, I'm grateful for your help and all, but I'm not going back to my folks and their drek-zeck condo, not..."

"Ah, the innocent fervor of youth," I chuckled, interrupting her. "No matter how it is expressed, it remains a fixed point in a changing universe. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" She looked blank. I translated. "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

"But I'm over eighteen! They can't make me go back!"

"Doubtless that is one reason that they contracted with private individuals, rather than having you picked up by Lone Star, who might have respected your legal rights. Miracles have been known to happen. But we stray from the topic. Who else might expend a significant amount of nuyen to gain possession of you, Ms. Winder?"

Her eyes shifted uneasily. "I can't think of anyone."

I sighed. Was she telling the truth? Did I dare take the chance of trusting her unsupported word? In the world of the shadows, there was only one answer. I reached out and touched her brow. Before she could react, I breathed a quiet phrase, and entered her mind. Her will power fought against the intrusion, but though she was strong, she was only a mundane. I saw what it was to be Sheila Winder. I was Sheila Winder.

I open the bottom drawer of my dresser, and draw out the sleek casing of the cyberdeck. For a moment, it seems I should be surprised that it's a Fuchi Cyber-6. Then I remember the mess of piddling Matrix runs on ten-yen toys, picking up a little cred here, a little cred there, until there was enough to pay Skimmer and get the real thing. Here. In my hands. Ready for a real run.

I pull the connector cable out of its slot and plug it into the datajack in my temple. Breathe deep. Boot up. The walls of the pretty, frilly bedroom that is standard issue for adolescent females in Mitsuhamas's San Furanshisuko Enclave, Complex Kantoku-3, shatter into a myriad of glittering dust motes, and out of the chaos forms the neon universe of the Matrix.

I've been here dozens of time before, but now I feel a momentary wave of nausea, as if this were somehow, horribly, wrong. It passes. It never really happened, did it?

I know the route I want to take. I've mapped the system schematics a hundred times on Daddy's secure terminal. A crystal snake, the Silicon Sidewinder, slithers through the data connections, blending with the flowing pulses of information. All conflicts resolve. I am Sheila and I am the snake, and I'm hunting.

I glide through the condo's Majordomo-2045 system, flashing a faked passcode at the glowing magenta chamberlain-figure at the SAN, out into the private LTG for Mitsuhamas SanFran. The Silicon Sidewinder turns into the logic probes of an unscheduled pre-maint run at the central switching office. I flip through the circuit blocks until I come to the shunt block for secure lines.

My probes dig into the glowing access constructs, and suddenly a glistening, night-black humanoid form looms in front of me. I display the maintenance ID. It rips my disguise logics away, and the Silicon Sidewinder shoots forward, sinking digital fangs into the guardian ice program. I pump attack code into the icon, clogging its subroutines with conflicting instructions until it crashes. Has it sounded an alarm? I don't know. Better hurry.

I want the dedicated line to the MCT/SF Credit Union. A few adjustments there and my deflated credstick will be all fat and happy. I find a circuit that seems to match the specs I want and slither into it.

I know this is no local call when I find myself whipping through the priority assignment dispatcher for a satellite uplink. Where the frag am I? I could always jack out, start over. If that ice I crashed didn't put a trace on the line. Drek, every buyer of a pirate cyberdeck gets a free bucket of paranoia, and mine has just arrived. Right, Sidewinder. Sub-zero, girl. Onward and upward.

Time gets sttrrrraannngggee fffooooorrrr aaa sseeeecccooonndd as my response-time stutters over the satellite link, then I'm in a datastore. A single icon is floating in open cyberspace. One file in a whole datastore. Looks like pay data. No apparent ice. Yeah, right.

I punch up a frame construct. A shimmering golden aura materializes around the Silicon Sidewinder, then slithers off toward that lonely, tempting file. A ghost snake, heading for the center of the datastore.

The space in front of the decoy frame swirls and solidifies into a shimmering, blue-white dragon form. It gives off dazzling pulses of radiance, like rapid-fire lightning. The feedback from the frame's sensors tell me that some of the stories deckers tell are true. This is black IC. If it engages the real Silicon Sidewinder, it could kill me. As it is, it rips into the code segments of the decoy frame.

I feel a crazy thrill, echoes of the adrenalin washing through my meat back in San Francisco, as I whip past the entangled icons of frame and ice, arrowing for the lonely datafile. The Sidewinder's fangs bite into the file metrics and data begins pumping down into my cyberdeck. I run the Fuchi all out, pulling information out of the Matrix as fast as its bandwidth will let me.

My frame program crashes, its sensors fading from my awareness in a blast of killer instructions from the Lightning Dragon ice. I swear at the datafile and my fingers back home reach for the datajack to break the connection that holds me in the Matrix. Just another second and I can jack out, just another sec...the end-of-file marker whips down the comm line, completing the download. My meat fingers tighten on the datajack. And lightning strikes along my nerves as the IC attacks.

In the Matrix, my programs suspend under the ripping command structures that flash from the Lightning Dragon into the Silicon Sidewinder. Back in San Francisco, my fingers hover, twitching, millimeters from breaking the connection.

The Lightning Dragon rips a piece out of the Silicon Sidewinder, and blood begins to drip from my nose as my blood pressure shoots up under the lethal biofeedback instructions flooding my cyberdeck, turning its ASIST interface into a machine programmed to kill me.

I launch a killer program, the Sidewinder's fangs slashing at the Lightning Dragon. The IC shifts its addressing to avoid the attack and another bolt of agony rips into me. I'm thrashing wildly, in panic, the scales flying off my disintegrating body into an endless void of cyberspace. Fight! Run! Bite! Jackoutjackoutjackoutjackoutjackout...

I was lying on the floor, my head throbbing dully. The memory of another's agony echoed in my nerves. Across the room, inside my skull, I could hear Sheila Winder sobbing uncontrollably. A calloused thumb peeled back my eyelid and the ceiling lights lanced in like the bolts that the Lightning Dragon had fired into my...into Sheila's...Matrix persona.

I made an inarticulate noise that apparently communicated my dearest wish, since the thumb was removed. I heard Nameless say "He's comin' round."

Iris said something in the melodious cadences of Sperethiel, the so-called elvish language. I recognized some of the more popular profanities. However, she did switch to English near the end. "I hope he's feeling at least half as slotting bad as this poor kid. What the frag did the drek-sucking sewer-mage do to her anyway?" Ah, well, Iris never did talk like the stereotypical elf maiden.

I decided that if I was conscious enough to analyze speech patterns, I was probably capable of sitting up. Or perhaps not? Come, Fortescue! *L'audace, encore de l'audace, toujours de l'audace.* I sat up. Too late, I recalled the fate of Danton, who had so praised audacity. Truth to tell, the guillotine seemed preferable. My headache erupted into a torrent of boiling acid, scouring the inside of my skull, before settling down to a tolerable pool of lava.

The next few minutes were a muddled flurry, with Iris trying to calm the hysterical Winder girl, while Nameless and Smedley fed me analgesics. Finally, all concerned were back to what passed for normal. I raised my head to face Sheila. She returned my gaze defiantly.

"Did you find what you were looking for, you fragging brainraper?" she spat out.



I took a deep breath. "You know what I found, Sheila. You are a decker. Short on experience, maybe, but talented and fast. You stumbled, literally, into a high-security database on a central Mitsuhamas system and downloaded a file so hot that Mitsuhamas had it guarded with black IC. And we both know what was in it, and why people were willing to kill to get it. Do you want to tell them? Or shall I?"

She held my eyes for a second longer, then her gaze faltered. In a small voice, she answered, "It was the master algorithm for system passcodes on all Mitsuhamas's corporate mainframes."

Nameless broke the silence. "I hate ta be the doofus, but what the frag is so hot about this algorithm?"

It was Smedley who answered. "It's da key to all da passcodes MCT has online. More'n dat, if you got da master algorithm, you kin figger out all da passcodes dat dey can have on der systems. Only way MCT can get around ya is if dey code a new algorithm and recompile ever' program dey got onna Matrix."

Iris chimed in. "I'm only guessing, but a job that big is going to take MCT a week to ten days. They have to design and test the new algorithm, then do the loads. It has to be a secure operation, or else they compromise the new code, and they're right back where they are now." She turned to the girl sitting beside her on the sofa. "When did you pull off this datasteal, Sheila?"

The girl and I answered in unison. "Three days ago." That earned me a glare from Iris, as if to ask how long my name had been Sheila. I rubbed my temples. Deep mind probes can be damnably disorienting.

Sheila continued speaking. "I knew that if any of that ice had ID'd me, or even traced back to my folks' condo, then corp-heat would be looking for me real fast. So I went out the door as soon as I could stand up. I thought, I...well, Seattle is supposed to be the place for hot data. I swapped my corporate credstick for enough scrip to buy a bus ticket and you know the rest." She seemed close to tears again. Iris laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Based on the welcoming committee that met you at the bus station, I think we have to assume Mitsuhamas knows you have this data," Iris said. "Their system vulnerability is at its peak now, with decreasing exposure as they migrate the new security subsystems through the Matrix. By this time next week, they won't give a frag who has Sheila's datasteal. But between now and then, they're going to move heaven and earth to get it, and her, back."

I stood up, gingerly, then walked over to Sheila's bag, slung carelessly in a corner of the room. I unzipped the case, reached inside, and pulled out the sleek shape of her cyberdeck.

"This contains the only copy of the download," I said. It was not a question. "Data valuable enough to make us rich, or to bring about our demise. Perhaps both. It's the key to your life and freedom, dear lady. I think I see a solution to our mutual dilemma. But it hinges on you, Sheila."

The girl...no, she had left childhood behind these three days past...the woman reached out to run her fingers over the smooth plastic casing of the deck. Our hands touched briefly. Mine were steady. So were hers. She smiled.

"So, what's the scam, Neddy?"

I walked along the waterfront as the morning sun warmed Seattle's misty sky to a light gray. The foggy light reminded me of home, and I was surprised to find a lump in my throat. Brace up, Sheila, you're a big, bad shadowrunner now. Or at least, you might be if you survive the next few hours.

Neddy had called Mr. Johnson to report that they'd found the poor little runaway. He had also hinted that he was more than a little ticked off by the fracas at King Street last night. Mr. Johnson claimed he didn't know anything about it.

Anyway, the deal is that I was supposed to wait in Waterfront Park, at 0700, and MCT security would come get me. After the pickup, Mr. Johnson would arrange payment for the shadowrunners, like always.

According to Neddy, I'd seen the error of my ways and just wanted to go home. I kept expecting to hear the strains of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" during Neddy's pitch to Mr. Johnson on the trid. When I said that, afterward, I got blank looks from everybody but Smedley, who rolled around on the floor hooting with laughter and bellowing, "There's no place like home," over and over, for at least a couple of minutes.

Everybody pretended they didn't know anything about datasteals, or corporate killers, or passcode algorithms.

At 0650, Iris' van had driven up Alaskan Way and stopped at Pike Street. It being just after sunrise on a Sunday morning, there was hardly any traffic. I got out and the van drove away, up Pike. I walked into the park until I came to the seawall. And waited.

At 0700, a boxy little car, an Allegra or an Americar, something totally suit and forgettable, drove up on Alaskan and stopped. Three people in Mitsuhamas uniforms got out. Two of them I didn't recognize. The third, the one wearing officer's epaulets, was the woman who'd fought with Nameless outside the station.

Okay. Yeah, I started to get scared. More scared than I already was, I mean. She was so fast, and when she hit Nameless, her hands had just ripped through cloth, and skin, and even his armor. I wasn't wearing any armor. I couldn't help thinking what her hands would do to me.

They walked toward me. I waited until they were about 20 meters away, then I pulled the Fuchi out from under my coat and held it where they could see it. They stopped.

"This is what you really want," I said. "Not me, just the file. So, can't you, like, take it, and leave me here? Or I can trash it, toss it into the water, right now, and then it can't give you any trouble."

The woman answered. "Sheila, we don't want any trouble for you, either. You're smart, you know how it is. We need to ask you a few questions, just to make sure no one else got a copy of the file. Honest, honey, nobody's mad at you. Why, the company needs computer wizards like you. Just come with us, we'll take your statement, and then...well, Sheila, your folks are worried about you. They miss their daughter. I promise, honey, I will personally make sure you see them again."

Dammit. Even though I already knew, I teared up when she said that. Iris had warned me last night. I didn't want to listen, but she made me. We'd used the passcode algorithm to access the security computers back in San Francisco. With the codes, I could hack open the hardest file locks they had. Even the Code Red files. Even the ones with the entries that said my parents had died under interrogation two days ago.

Knowing what the damn company had done, and yes, my own guilty rage about it, made the next step easier. "O.K., officer. You want the deck? Here it is." I pushed the boot button and threw it at them, as I dove flat to the ground.

She was fast. She realized what was coming and jumped away. One of the two men just stood there. The other reached out and caught the deck. He had it figured out, too, and tried to sling it back, at me, at the water, I don't know.

It blew up in his hands.

I lifted my head from the sidewalk. I saw the security officer who'd grabbed the deck lying in the grass. There was blood everywhere. The other man was still standing there, smiling. Some kind of magic shield flickered around him, where it had stopped the explosion from hurting him. The woman had rolled to her feet. She had a scrape mark on one cheek, but besides that she didn't look hurt at all.

She looked at the man on the grass, then she looked at me. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. She just came at me, almost faster than I could see. She was maybe three steps away when a dripping wet shape vaulted over the sea wall and hit her with both feet. She flew back half a dozen meters.

Nameless grinned at her. "S'right, chummer. How's about you'n me go round an' round again?"

It was like she flickered.

One moment she was on the ground, the next she was on her feet. "You've been living on borrowed time, vat boy," she said.

I saw the wage mage point a finger at Nameless. Black fire flared out at the samurai, but something seemed to suck the flames up, a few centimeters from his body. The magician stopped smiling. He looked around frantically, trying to spot where the protection spell had come from.

Nameless and the adept were just two blurs. Neither of them even tried to use a gun. Some kind of honor thing, I guess, like the bushido drek they crammed into us at school. If I'd had a gun, and even a chance in hell of hitting her, I'd have been blasting away at the adept for all I was worth.

Suddenly, the wage mage stiffened, and started making passes with his hands. His eyes were closed, like he was fighting something in his sleep. He grabbed something I couldn't see off his

lapel, and threw it away. There was a puff of dust in mid-air, like something small had just turned to smoke. A second later, his head exploded, and I heard the crack of a rifle shot.

Later on, I found out that Neddy had attacked some kind of magic thing that the wage mage was using to keep a force field around himself. If the mage hadn't thrown it away, Neddy says he

would've been able to make a spell "ground to manifestation" through the focus. But once the magician lost his force field, he was vulnerable to Smedley's sniper rifle. End of that story.

The fight between Nameless and the adept was a stalemate, both of them now bleeding from a couple of bad wounds. They'd even slowed down to where I could see the moves they were using, all of them a lot more advanced than anything I ever learned for the self-defense merit badge in the corporate Scouts.

So I don't know what the name of the move was that Nameless used. All I know is that one moment the two fighters were going after grips on each other, and the next, the adept was on the ground, with her head at an angle that necks don't allow unless they're broken.

Nameless stood there for a minute, looking down at the body. Then he came over to where I was still lying on the ground. "Howzitgoin' for ya, Winder?" he asked. I started to say I was fine, then

found myself leaning on his shoulder, bawling like a baby.

We got out of the area fast, before any follow-up from Mitsuhamma could arrive. The next few days are going to be pretty busy. Iris says she's going to introduce me to a decker she knows, and that the two of us are going to be visiting a lot of Mitsuhamma financial systems while those passcodes are still valid.

We've already taken care of one piece of business. Every reference to Sheila Winder, SIN 8452-523-09945, has been wiped out of the MCT databases. The corporate system has also issued a dossier recall on that SIN to the national databanks. So I guess Sheila Winder is dead. But Sidewinder is doing fine, thanks.

In one day, all the rules I thought I knew, changed. But it's still the same world, the same me. Maybe it's like Neddy said. The little stuff changes, but the real stuff, that's forever. *Plus ça change?* Works for me.

